

ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF *VACCINIUM* L.

S. P. VANDER KLOET

In most botanical works, the name *Vaccinium* is not translated as a rule, but in those few cases where the author appears to have given the word some thought, the usual solution has been to issue the following statement: an ancient Latin name of obscure derivation (Johnson, 1636; Smith *in* Rees, 1817; Gray, 1848; Rehder, 1927) presumably from the Latin *vaccinus*, of cows (Fernald, 1950). However, both Johnson and Smith also suggest that *Vaccinium* is possibly derived from the Greek *Hyacinthos*. This notion is still given credence in the most recent *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Glare, 1982) where *Vaccinium* is defined as a possible corrupt form of *vakinthos*, a term for a dark-flowered plant such as an orchid or fritillary. The purpose of this paper is to present an argument against the derivation of *Vaccinium* from *vakinthos*.

The word "*Vaccinium*" is first encountered in Virgil's *Eclogues* where he uses it in the following lines: "*alba ligustra cadunt, vaccinia nigra leguntur*" (*Ecloga* II: 18); "*mollia luteola pingit vaccinia caltha*" (*Ecloga* II: 50); and "*et nigrae violae sunt et vaccinia nigra*" (*Ecloga* X: 39).

These quotations have been translated by Dryden (1880) as follows:

"White lilies lie neglected on the plain While dusky hyacinths for use remain" (*Ecl.* 2: 18)

"And set soft hyacinths with iron blue, To shade marsh marigolds of shining hue;" (*Ecl.* 2: 39)

"Tho' Phyllis brown, tho' black Amyntas were, Are violets not sweet, because not fair" (*Ecl.* 10: 39)

And in a more pedestrian manner by Fairclough (1960):

"The white privets fall, the dark hyacinths are culled" (*Ecl.* 2: 18)

"Sets off the delicate hyacinth with the golden marigold" (*Ecl.* 2: 50)

"Violets, too, are black and black are hyacinths" (*Ecl.* 10: 39)

Later usage by Vitruvius (7.14.2) "*Eadem ratione vaccinium temperantes et lactem miscentes purpuram faciunt elegantem*"

and by Ovid (Tr. 1.1.5) "*nec te purpureo velent vaccinia fuco*" suggest that a dark purple dye was extracted from *Vaccinium*. Pliny (Nat. 16: 77) merely mimics Virgil "*salices . . . ligustra tesseris utilissima item vaccinia Italiae*" but erroneously has both *Vaccinium* and *Salix* growing in swamps along with *Alnus* and other species of wet sites.

Since corollas from hyacinths, fritillaries, and orchids are not known for their natural dyes (McGrath, 1977) the apparent contradiction (especially between the translators of Virgil and those of Ovid and Vitruvius) is nevertheless easily resolved if the labial "B" is substituted for "V," as was first proposed by Johnson (1636: 1418) who argued that "Baccae may be called berries, *Vaccinia* as though they should be called *Baccinia*."

The pronunciation of "B" (β in Greek) as "V" was becoming common not only in Hellenistic Greek (Browning, 1983) but it also began to occur in vulgar Latin, especially during the Principate, while at the same time "V" ceased to be pronounced as "W" (Haadsma and Nuchelmans, 1963). In short, "B" and "V" were moving towards a common pronunciation and could be confused. Virgil (70 BC–19 BC) was born and raised near Mantua in Cisalpine Gaul where he would have seen (and possibly eaten) the bilberry with its dark blue-black fruit, as well as privet (*Ligustrum*) and bindweed (now *Convolvulus*, but probably called *Ligustrum* in Virgil's time according to Page, 1960). As a linguist and poet, Virgil would have been aware of this trend where "V" was substituted for "B" and might have made use of it in his first major collection of poems. Thus, if we then also substitute *Baccinia* for *Vaccinia* in his *Eclogues*, and translate the word as "berry", the lines cited above make more sense and the result jibes with the usage of Ovid and Vitruvius.

"The white privet falls, the black berries are picked" (Ecl. II: 18). Regardless, whether *ligustra* is translated as privet or bindweed, the corollas are either short-lived or stink, or both. "He paints soft berries and mellow-yellow marsh marigolds" (Ecl. 2: 50). "Black berries and dark Violets" (Ecl. 10: 39). These simple yet pleasing images are well in line with the usage apparently envisioned by both Ovid and Vitruvius, who are both correct in their assessment of the dyeing properties of bilberries, whortleberries and blueberries. Recall the current television advertisement where the Efferdent solution quickly removes the dark blue-violet stain from a string of genuine pearls extracted from a blueberry pie.

Some purists may argue that this interpretation detracts from the elegance of the *Eclogues* and makes them more vulgar but let us remember that they are basically poems about bucolic leisure. But this interpretation resolves a dichotomy in meaning and unifies ancient usage with current usage, where *Vaccinium* is a large cosmopolitan genus of small-berried shrubs and trees. The only proviso centers on the absence of *Vaccinia* in any known classical Latin text. Nonetheless the etymology *bacca* → *Vaccinium* is the most likely, although admittedly decisive textual proof is wanting.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank B. Verstraete for his careful perusal of this manuscript; his expert comments were much appreciated, nevertheless any remaining errors and omissions are strictly mine.

LITERATURE CITED

- BROWNING, R. 1983. *Medieval and Modern Greek*, 2nd ed. Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge, pp. 26–31.
- DRYDEN, J. 1880. *Works of Virgil*. American Book Exchange, New York, NY.
- FAIRCLOUGH, H. R. 1960. *Virgil, Vol. 1. Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–VI*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- FERNALD, M. L. 1950. *Gray's Manual of Botany*, 8th ed., American Book Company, New York, NY.
- GLARE, P. G. W. 1982. *Oxford Latin Dictionary. Fascicle § Sopor-Zythum*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- GRAY, A. 1848. *Manual of Botany*. James Munroe and Co., Boston and Cambridge, MA.
- HAADSMA, R. A. AND J. NUCHELMANS. 1963. *Précis de Latin Vulgare*. Walter, Groningen, Nederland, pp. 26–31.
- JOHNSON, T. 1636. *Gerards Herbal*. Norton and Whitakers, London.
- MCGRATH, J. W. 1977. *Dyes from Lichens and Plants*. Van Nostrand Reinhold Ltd., New York, NY.
- PAGE, T. E. 1960. *Virgil: Bucolics and Georgics*. MacMillan and Co. Ltd., London.
- REHDER, A. 1927. *Manual of Cultivated Trees and Shrubs*. MacMillan Co., New York, NY.
- SMITH, J. E. 1817. *Vaccinium*. In: *Rees's Cyclopaedia*, Vol. 36. Longman, Hurts, Rees, Orme and Brown, London.

BIOLOGY DEPARTMENT
ACADIA UNIVERSITY
WOLFVILLE, NOVA SCOTIA
CANADA B0P 1X0